Memories of Avery

Harry R. "Bob" Kautzman

I grew up around railroads from the time I was about two years old. I was born in Everett, Wash., in 1948, and my father, John Kautzman, worked as an electrician in the shipyards, a job he had during the war and continued with afterward. In 1950, he went to work for the Great Northern in Spokane, Wash., as a traveling electrician. Then, in 1952, we moved to Leavenworth, Wash., where the GN had electric service over the Cascade Mountains from Wenatchee to Skykomish through the 8-mile Cascade Tunnel. In 1958, GN eliminated the electric service. After a year in Seattle as an electrician at King Street Station, my father was offered a job on the trolley crew for the Milwaukee Road in Avery, Idaho.

I remember the first time we arrived in Avery. It was very isolated, and the only ways in were by rail or by auto on narrow, twisting dirt logging roads. It was 32 miles over Moon Pass to get to Wallace, Idaho, or 52 miles down river to St. Maries. Avery was mainly a logging and railroad town, but there was also a large ranger station which was headquarters for the St. Joe National Forest.

Avery was as close to the Wild West as you could get in 1959. There was one deputy sheriff who pretty much knew everyone and ignored everything. I can remember driving my dad's old Studebaker down to the swimming hole when I was only 13 years old. Avery had a general store, two taverns, a beanery (aside from the station lunch room), the depot and a large brick substation. There was a lot of Milwaukee housing which was provided free of charge, or at very little cost, to the employees.

***Above**: Avery's post office in 1971. **Facing page:** In late afternoon, an eastbound train, possibly 262, has just taken on a Little Joe at the Avery depot as a boxcab set stands by ready to assist in the climb over St. Paul Pass. It's late summer 1971—the twilight years of Milwaukee Road's electrified era.—BOTH PHOTOS, MIKE SCHAFER*

The first year my father was there, I lived with him and went to school. My mother lived in Spokane, Wash., so my older brother could go to school there. (Avery did not have a school above the 8th grade, and high school kids had to be boarded out to St. Maries to attend school.) On weekends, I rode the *Olympian Hiawatha* from Avery to Spokane to spend the weekend with my mother, returning on Sunday night. I was always intrigued by the Skytop observation car and thought it would be great to ride it just once. Unfortunately, I never got a chance. I spent most of my time in the Super Dome and used to play cards with the porters or crew when they had time. The were all very nice and made sure I got back and forth safely.

My father and I lived in a tiny one-room shack across the yard from the depot next to the river. Our only heat source was an old wooden stove, and we had cold running water only. I remember going across the tracks to use the bathroom in the depot, but if the tracks were full or there was a train being switched, we had to use a toilet that was built out over the river. You would walk out on wooden planks to an outhouse—very breezy during the winter—which was about 10 feet out from the bank. I was told this was the place to catch the fattest fish, though I never had a desire to try. We bathed at other people's homes.

I left Avery in 1960 to attend school in Spokane, but in 1967, I returned and began training to become a telegrapher. Of course, by this time the passenger service had long been eliminated and Avery was thus even more isolated. I worked with a telegrapher named Bob Cass who taught me pretty much what I needed to know. By this time, we didn't use the key, as everything was done by Teletype and phone, so the title of telegrapher was somewhat of a misnomer. I worked in Avery from 1967 until October 1970.

Since Avery was a division point between the Rocky Mountain and the Coast divisions, and crews as well as locomotives were changed there. Crews from the west ran between Avery and Malden, Wash., while eastbound crews ran from Avery to Alberton, Mont. The diesels that came from the coast were replaced by the Little Joes and the boxcabs to make the run over the mountains. Shortly after I started, the Milwaukee began experimenting with running the diesels through and working them in tandem with the electrics. Then in about 1969, the railroad began using radio-controlled "slave" units in place of the manually operated helper units. This was a disaster at the beginning.

They had started using the slave units on train 262 going east from Avery and they kept having derailments—some of them really bad—in the tunnels or just out of the tunnels on the mountains. I remember my father, who was a trolley foreman, going out in mountains in blinding snow at temperatures well below freezing and spending days trying to restore the trolley wire while other crews got the cars rerailed or unloaded and reloaded. My father wasn't a young man any more, so it must have been hard for him to stay out in that freezing weather day and night to restore service.

The derailments went on for some time until someone figured out that they were the result of empty auto racks being switched to the front of the train out of Avery. When the head end of the train went through a long tunnel, there was a loss of continuity between the head locomotives and the slave units; the slave units were designed to go into neutral when this happened. As soon as the lead units came out of the tunnel and restored continuity to the slaves, the slaves would surge forward and lift the empty auto racks off the track if they were on an outside curve, causing a derailment. Once the empties were moved to the rear of the train, this and a lot of the other problems were resolved.

One thing I remember most about my father and his work was the unusual motorcar that his crew used. It was large and would seat about four men on a side. The engine was in the middle with a seating area on top and running boards down the side. The crew scavenged up some old swivel bar stools and installed them on each side of the car. There were long canvas curtains that could be closed along the side. They had a ladder arrangement on top, I believe, to reach the trolley at mid-span for maintenance. It was certainly different-looking hybrid, but it served its purpose well.

Most of the time, the crew was doing routine maintenance. The trolley was a heavy solid copper strand, but the locomotive pantographs occasionally would arc and burn or melt the copper, and it had to be replaced in spots. They also replaced trolley poles and aerial supports for the trolley. I spent a lot of time as a youngster riding with my father on the motorcars, and I still think it was the greatest thrill a kid could have. I'm sure that today it would be frowned upon for safety reasons.

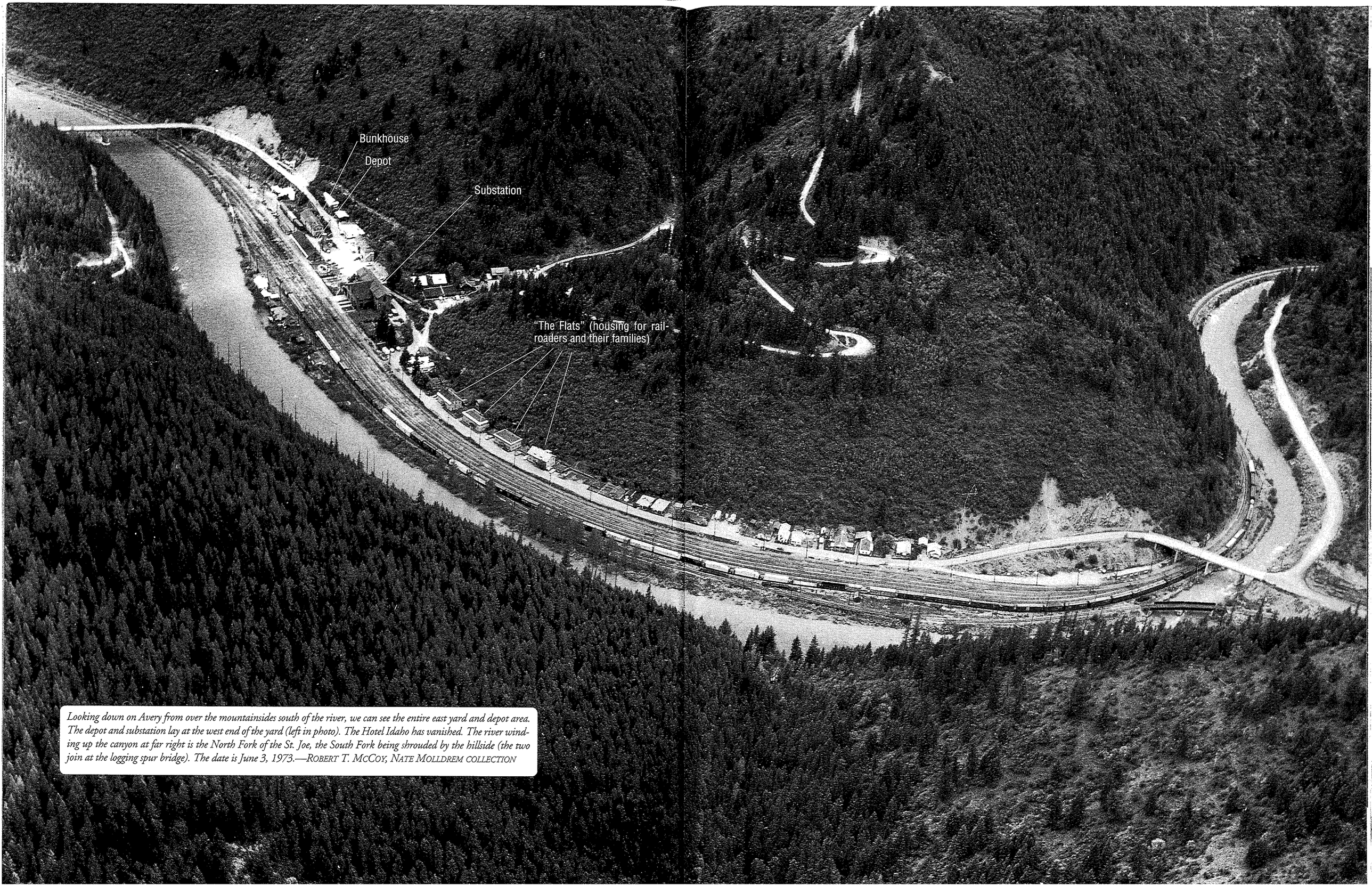
I worked Monday through Friday from 3:30 P.M. until midnight but was subject to call-outs until the morning shift came in at 6 A.M. Since the Interstate Commerce Commission limited us to working no more than 9 hours in 24, we had to be real creative with our call-outs. I can remember once or twice when we were really busy, my check was bigger than my father's. I spent part of my time—when I wasn't taking train orders from the dispatcher or sending orders—next door at the beanery. We could buy coupon books that we used as script at the beanery, and they would take it out of our paycheck—a handy arrangement when times were lean. The railroad used to hire transients to be short-order cooks, and we had a rather bizarre bunch working in the depot lunch room over the years. It was the same bunch of guys on a rotational basis. They would work a few weeks until they could save up some money to go on a "toot" in St. Maries or Wallace. Then, after they spent all their money and sobered up, they'd return for another few weeks. I never got poisoned though, so I guess I was just lucky.

We had our share of barroom brawls and drunk crewmembers. Avery was that kind of wild and wooly place. The closest doctor was in St. Maries except for the local nurse, Blanch Petersen, who used to doctor minor emergencies and administer shots as well as give medical advice. Her husband, Jimmy, was a helper engineer and his father, Emmett Peterson, was the yardmaster.

In 1974, the Milwaukee pulled out its electrics and went all diesel. My father was in his 60s by this time and took this opportunity to retire while his crew stayed on to dismantle the lines. One man, Ernie Dunlap, who had worked for my father for years, was electrocuted during this process. It seemed ironic that he should survive so many years of hardship and then have his life ended as the electrification was being removed.

Today, there is a paved road all the way from St. Maries to Avery, much of it on former railbed. The substation has been dismantled, and all of the tracks and the yard are gone. The depot remains and is used by the community. The Forest Service still has a presence there, and there's still some logging going on, but nothing like it used to be. Avery has faded away from its railroad past, but it's still a fine place to fish and enjoy the outdoors.

As for me, after I left Avery in 1970, I worked for the Burlington Northern as a relay telegrapher and relief wire chief until 1972. I then went back to college and received a degree from Eastern Washington University. I'm now working in Seattle for USWEST, testing ISDN computer lines. My memories of Avery have faded somewhat over the years, but I still get occasional flashbacks of the times I had there, both good and bad. I hope this brings back some memories for others as well. For those of you who never knew Avery in those days of passengers and freights, electrics and diesels, it was an interesting, wonderful, unusual and wild place, and I doubt we will ever know anything like it again.



*Looking down on Avery from over the mountainsides south of the river, we can see the entire east yard and depot area. The depot and substation lay at the west end of the yard (left in photo). The Hotel Idaho has vanished. The river winding up the canyon at far right is the North Fork of the St. Joe, the South Fork being shrouded by the hillside (the two join at the logging spur bridge). The date is June 3, 1973.—*ROBERT T. MCCOY, NATE MOLLDREM COLLECTION

railment when slave units were in use.

A non-electrified logging branch, laid by the Forest Service, split from track 6 and headed easterly, curving across the St. Joe River just east of the juncture of the north and south forks. On the north side of the river, this branch—known tongue-in-cheek as the "St. Joe & Eastern"—had several short spurs for log loading and was used into the 1970s.

The west end of the east yard condensed into three tracks which in turn led to the west yard. Here stood the steam, diesel and electric locomotive servicing facilities, including sand storage house, oil house, coal dock, boiler house and assorted storage houses. At its largest, the roundhouse had 12 stalls and a machine shop; neither the roundhouse nor the turntable was electrified. Electrics were powered off the turntable and into roundhouse stalls using what was essentially a long (and very heavy-duty) extension cord.

Early in the 1970s, after rising complaints from the crafts (unions) about food in the Beanery and the unkempt conditions of the hotel, the railroad terminated its contract with Interstate. The Milwaukee then hired local women to keep the bunkhouse rooms clean and to operate the Beanery. Overflow that had been handled in the hotel was now accommodated in the small roadmaster's office building just west of the depot. The hotel was shuttered, and shortly thereafter it collapsed.

Although the Pacific Extension has been gone for 20 years, Avery survives, largely account of the lumber industry but also because of a thriving tourist element as well, thanks in part to the conversion of the Milwaukee main line into hiking/biking trails. The Avery depot remains as the most prominent reminder of the town's one-time close ties to the railroad, serving as a community center and museum. Alas, the landmark No. 14 substation building has been completely eradicated, as have the roundhouse and all other engine-terminal facilities. The main road through town has been paved and relocated mostly onto the railroad right-of-way. If it weren't for the depot and many memorable photos, the casual observer would hardly realize that this little burgh buried in the Bitterroots was once a bustling railroad town.

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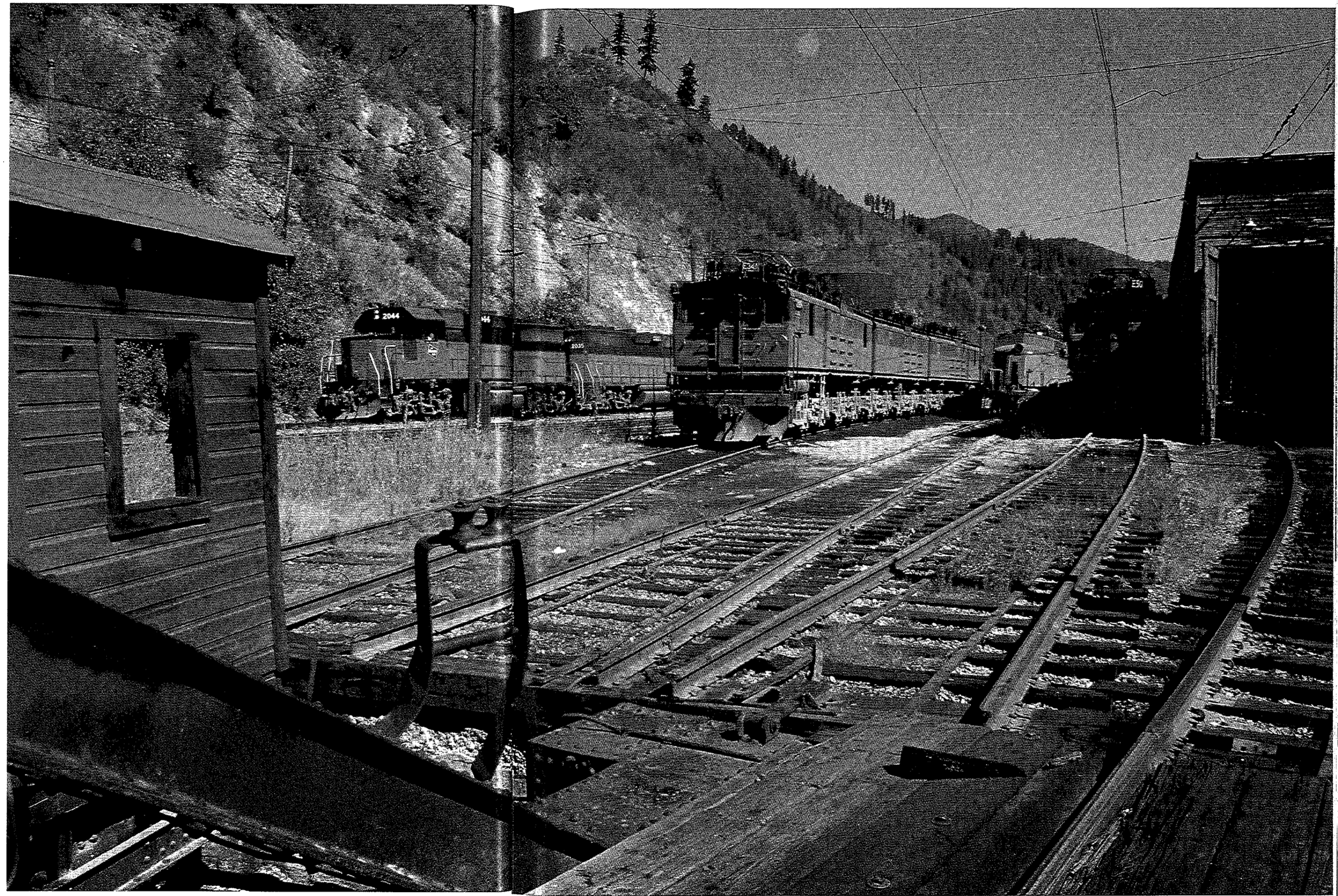

Shorn of its electric locomotive, train 261 resumes its journey to Tacoma over the Coast Division in September 1971, passing electric steeds whose domain is the Rocky Mountain Division.—MIKE SCHAFER